

# How You Can Create a Climate Of High Expectations in the Classroom

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**“H**e doesn’t talk much. He reads at a first-grade level. We’re working on coloring and staying in the lines.”

As a public school special education teacher, nothing upsets me more than statements like these. An incoming sixth grader, the student described by these statements, gained three years of academic growth that year. By the end of seventh grade, he was in all mainstream classes, played baritone in the band, and was a fantastic cross-country athlete.

The most recent prevalence study conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) shows that almost half (44 percent) of children identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) have *average to above average* intellectual ability. The rate of individuals with ASD who *do not* have a co-occurring intellectual disability is rising faster than the rate of individuals with ASD and intellectual disability (CDC, 2018). A 2016 study of 1,470 children discovered that *nearly half of individuals with minimally-verbal autism had high nonverbal intelligence* (Zeliadt, 2016). Compare that



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to a 2015 study—less than 20 percent of students with autism in Texas public schools were in a mainstream setting, and in New York, less than 10 percent (Kurth, J., 2015, pp. 249-256). Those students are not being educated with and in the same setting as their peers. For adults with autism, the statistics are just as alarming. National data indicate that the majority of adults with autism are unemployed or underemployed (Migliore, Butterworth & Zalewska, 2012). Some sites report the percentage to be as high as 90 percent. How has this even happened?

When we presume *incompetence*, it's in our nature to look for things to support that. Conversely, when we presume *competence*, we look for evidence of that as well. We look for every little task accomplished that says to us, "If he can do that, I know he can do this!" Researchers Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson conducted an experiment at a primary school where all the students sat for an intelligence test. The experimenters gave the teachers the names of the students who scored in the top 20 percent, telling them they showed exceptional potential and would achieve high results within the year. Unbeknownst to the teachers, these "high-scoring" students were randomly selected, and the testing showed no such prediction. When all the students were tested again eight months later, the so-called "gifted" students performed significantly higher than the rest. Rosenthal and Jacobson referred to this as the Pygmalion effect (Pygmalion Effect, n.d.). When you set high expectations for students, the amazing tends to happen—they meet them!

What are the consequences of presuming incompetence? Learners with autism are often educated in more restricted settings. We communicate with them differently—we use more basic vocabulary and we "baby talk." How many times have you heard someone talking to a teenager with autism as if they were five or six years old? What an insult to someone who may have the cognitive abilities of a genius! They also often don't get invited to participate in groups and activi-

ties in which their peers take part. When they aren't involved in social groups, they miss out on opportunities to make friends and in turn miss out on opportunities to develop key social skills. Due to a lack of social skills, they often come across as socially awkward, which causes others to view them as incompetent.

What is the harm of assuming competence? NONE! Yes, in some instances, we might spend some time working to find supports that help them be successful, but in no way have they been denied their *right* to try. A large part of the level of success learners will ultimately achieve depends on the level of expectation we set for them. Every learner in your schooling program should have the same ultimate goal. Does that mean every child will work on the same skills or learn skills the same way? No. Does it mean that he/she will reach the end goal in the same amount of time? Definitely not. But our attitudes should be that we are going to do whatever it takes for however long it takes to help each learner reach the end achievement. The assumption of competency is imperative to changing the completely unacceptable statistics that are right now the norm.

The following intentional strategies will help empower your program or organization to create a climate of high expectations for all learners:

- **Know your learners**

Find out their interests. Ask about their learning styles. What supports do they already receive that help them succeed?

- **Set short-term goals**

Set goals for them that you are certain they will achieve. When they master a short-term goal, use the momentum from that success to introduce another slightly more difficult goal.

- **Utilize the Goldilocks Principle**

Give students tasks that aren't too easy and aren't too hard, but are just right for them (Estrada, 2018).

- **Build on the learner's strengths**

Set goals that allow students to utilize natural abilities. Incorporate those strengths into other tasks as much as possible.

- **Make expectations explicit**

Define the instructions clearly and concisely. Don't "dumb down" your language, but rather, cut out any unnecessary words. Give instructions one or two steps at a time if necessary. Use visuals to support understanding of expectations.

- **Provide praise at a 7:1 ratio to correction**

There is ALWAYS something good you can say about someone!

- **Use positive language**

Re-frame your corrections in a positive way. Instead of saying, "Don't run!" you should say, "Walk in the hallway, please."

- **Don't GIVE the correct answer**

Probe for answers. Ask leading questions. When students solve a problem or realize a solution on their own, they are much more likely to remember.

- **Don't just tell a learner what they've done wrong**

Again, probe. When learners understand the rationale for a skill and recognize the personal value of that skill, they are much more likely to use that skill.

- **Give longer response time**

Wait at least five seconds before you repeat a question. For some, this time may need to be longer. As you get to know your learners, you will begin to recognize what length of wait time is sufficient.

- **Always remember that behavior is communication**

Take a course in Behavior 101. Understand the four functions of behavior (escape, attention, tangible, and sensory) and be familiar with strategies to address behaviors related to each function.

- **Provide equal response opportunities**

Because the level of support needed for learners to practice may be high, and they might take more "work," our inclination might be to not call on them as often. Be assured, learners will recognize this slight.

- **Don't be afraid**

Some learners may look different, have habits that make you uncomfortable, or even have behaviors that can be quite scary. Regardless, use proximity as an assurance that they are liked and supported as much as any other learner. Stand close to them when giving instructions, give high-fives, and just smile to assure them you're on their side.

- **Treat the students like everyone else**

Talk to them about the same age-appropriate topics. If a student is nonverbal, have a conversation with them anyway. Never talk *about* them in front of them. Include them in age-appropriate activities. Everything their peers do, they should do as well.

- **Know how to use teaching strategies that work**

Different teaching strategies work for various students for various reasons. Be educated in evidence-based practices.

- **Don't ever give up**

Provide high levels of support. Finding supports that work may take trial and error. Don't get frustrated. Often, finding the right supports requires thinking outside the box. Consult with others who might have great ideas. If a learner works with other instructors or therapists, get permission to consult with them. The best effort is a team effort. Someone else who knows the student may already know a solution to your situation. And don't forget to ask the student! Many times, they can tell us exactly what they need to help them be successful if we just take the time to listen.

You may be thinking that these strategies are obvious and should be done anyway. You're right. They should. But unfortunately, they often aren't. Very sadly, many individuals with disabilities are often denied the dignity of being treated as a capable individual and knowing someone believes in them. When strategies for creating a climate of high expectations are implemented, students will know. Students will trust you because they understand you are going to treat them with dignity and respect. They will recognize your program as a safe place where they can try and not be afraid to make mistakes. Those on the spectrum *need* us to see them as people first. They *need* us to believe

in them. Most importantly, they *need* us to provide a climate of high expectations, so they have the freedom to learn, succeed, and fulfill their potential.

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